

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 265 411

CE 043 454

AUTHOR Bennett, William J.
TITLE Address by the United States Secretary of Education to the Annual Convention of the American Vocational Association.
INSTITUTION Department of Education, Washington, DC. Office of the Secretary.
PUB DATE 6 Dec 85
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the American Vocational Association Convention (Atlanta, GA, December 6, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Objectives; *Educational Principles; Outcomes of Education; *Role of Education; Secondary Education; *Vocational Education

ABSTRACT

The educational system of the United States reflects U.S. respect for both diversity and equality. Differences in students' aspirations are accommodated by offering both precollegiate and vocational education. Three essential major purposes of education are the civic, the personal, and the utilitarian. Where the civic and personal ends of education are concerned, Americans have essentially the same goals for all students. When the utilitarian ends of education are considered, more serious disagreement over curricula arises. The utilitarian ends of education are governed more by considerations of diversity. Two rival views exist regarding students choosing employment requiring less than a baccalaureate degree. One holds that what the employment-bound student needs is academic rigor; the other, that academics are not important but training in a trade is. A new consensus among educators and employers lies in the middle: the utilitarian function of school is to assist in preparing all students for that 40-year sequence of events following graduation--for different employers, different jobs, and different trades. Three sets of attributes are needed: general skills, general knowledge, and worthy values and habits. The main objective of learning in schools must be the same for all students; differences in educational programs must never invite distinctions of citizenship. (YLB)

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Friday, December 6, 1985 9:00 p.m. (EST)

Contact: Loye Miller
(202) 732-3020
Wilma Bailey
(202) 245-8907

Address By

William J. Bennett

United States Secretary of Education

to

Annual Convention of the American Vocational Association

Marriott Marquis Hotel

Atlanta, Georgia

December 6, 1985

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Let me begin by saying how much I appreciate the invitation to be with you tonight. This is my first opportunity to present my thoughts on the role of vocational education in America's schools. I hope what I say tonight will be a first contribution to an ongoing conversation with you and your colleagues. As you all know, my own teaching background is not in vocational education. But that does not mean I bring a natural predisposition against it to this job. I do not. In some parts of the academy there is sometimes condescension, sometimes a patronizing attitude, toward those who know how to do things. I do not share such attitudes. I never have.

As Secretary of Education, I am as concerned about the progress of vocational education as I am about the progress of any other branch of education. Let me say frankly that I am concerned that in the education reform movement of recent years, vocational education has not been given the attention it should. That is not right. We must engage the American people in a conversation about education in all respects. And so I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts on what I have to say tonight. Let's begin the conversation tonight, and let me offer a statement of my guiding principles.

I am aware of the breadth and diversity that vocational education has been called to serve. Tonight, however, I would like us to keep in the back of our minds vocational programs in

comprehensive high schools, programs which of course have a direct impact on students in post-secondary vocational education.

Let me start with first principles. We are, in Lincoln's words, a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. I think we would all readily agree that equality is the principle most fundamental to the constitution of our democracy and to the organization of our society. What does this mean, to be equal? Well, according to our Declaration of Independence, it means to be endowed with certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Equality in America, then, consists in equal opportunity being offered a very diverse people. A "diverse people," for although we are equal, we are not all the same.

America's educational system reflects America's respect for both diversity and equality. It is not our way to achieve unity at the expense of diversity. It has been one of the strengths of our educational system to accommodate differences in students' needs. For example, we offer different kinds of education to compensate for differences in students' backgrounds. And to accommodate differences in students' aspirations, we offer precollegiate and vocational education. But in all the education of the young, the best education is a good general education. It is an education that lays a solid foundation of general skills, general knowledge, and sound character. These are the most important tools that any person can use on any job. We must give our students those tools as early as possible. And the most

important formal education for any job may well come in elementary school, long before our students know the meaning of the word "vocation."

What are the goals of education? Why do we send our children to school? In the Rockfish Gap report, Thomas Jefferson sought to advise his fellow Virginians about the objectives of education. We may discern from his advice three major purposes. They are, I believe, of greater pertinence to the ideals of vocational education than has often been realized.

The first we might call the civic purpose of education. Our schools, Jefferson wrote, must inform their charges of their "rights, interests, and duties as men and citizens." They must give the student the ability to "understand his duties to his neighbors and country, and to discharge with competency the functions confided to him by either." Our schools, he added, must "improve [the student's] morals and faculties."

In short, education should prepare our children for the cultural, social, and political milieu in which they live. It should help give them the rudiments of citizenship, decent behavior, and an understanding of rights and obligations.

A second purpose of education is what we might call the "personal" purpose. Jefferson advises that schools instruct children in the "outlines of geography and history," and that they enable people to "express and preserve their ideas...in writing." Education, he wrote, should "develop the reasoning faculties of our youth, enlarge their minds...and enlighten them with the mathematical and physical sciences."

It is these things which help prepare our students to fulfill their lives not simply as economic or civic beings, but as people who think, feel, observe, read, enjoy the world around them, and work toward worthwhile dreams. These are among the personal ends of education.

Last is what I will call the utilitarian end of education. As Jefferson writes, we must give "every citizen the ability he needs for the transaction of his own business." Educators should prepare students for the next stage of their lives by supplying them the credentials and skills they will need right away, including those necessary to make a living. In this sense, all education should aim at the worthy practice of one's employment. All students, not just students who sign up for vocational education, should be encouraged to form a view and a goal of useful work.

Here, then, are three essential purposes to education: the civic, the personal, the utilitarian. Of course, there is a good deal of overlap. There may be differences over particulars, but these are things that we hope our schools will do for our students. We wish all our students to be good, and we want all our students to be good for something.

So much for the ends of education. What of the means? How do these lofty ambitions affect what we teach and how and to whom we teach it? What is the significance of these aims to the curriculum offered students who choose employment rather than college?

I think most Americans would agree that, where the civic ends of education are concerned, we have essentially the same goals for all students. It is a matter of their participation in society, and we want all Americans equally equipped for that participation. All, then, will need instruction in the functions of our government and the principles on which it is founded. And all must be impressed with the values that our society cherishes.

When it comes to the subjects that contribute to the personal ends of education, we also find something approaching consensus. First of all, our students need certain basic skills-- the ability to read and write, to grasp ideas and express thoughts. And we want all students to be exposed to great literature, to have an idea of how their world was formed, and to know what things should be valued before others.

It is when we consider the utilitarian ends of education that we reach more serious disagreement over curricula. The utilitarian ends of education are governed even more by considerations of diversity. They have to do with the ways in which we are different, particularly in terms of abilities and aspirations. How much, then, must we vary the curriculum from student to student?

We know that there is one group for whom the curriculum may be held fairly steady: students who will be entering college immediately after high school. The high school's role in the utilitarian education of these students is essentially preparation for college, and that means a strong academic curriculum:

courses in writing, literature, history, chemistry, math, foreign language and the like, as well as in the basic and "higher order" skills.

With the student who chooses employment requiring less than a baccalaureate degree, however, we encounter more disagreement as to the best tack to take. We might cite two rival views. You know them.

There is, on the one hand, the view which holds that what the employment-bound student needs is academic rigor. Indeed, the argument goes, we must be especially diligent in the academic education of the vocational student, for whereas we may hope that colleges improve upon what we offer the college-bound student, this is society's last chance to mold those who choose not to attend college.

On the other hand is the view that the student not planning on college does not really need to learn much by way of academics. Instead he must learn a trade that he can use immediately after graduating. The purpose of school is to train him to be a welder, a secretary, a lab technician, computer programmer or day-care worker. On leaving school, this youngster should have all the skills and know-how to step right into the work force.

These are the two extremes. Few people view either as very realistic. It is our task to stake out a sensible middle ground.

As a start, we might consider for a moment what we know about the job experience of the average worker. We know a person will do many things in the course of his lifetime. He will

probably hold several different jobs, perhaps switching fields or specialties before deciding on a career. In fact, today's graduate may well eventually work in some jobs that do not yet exist, using technology not yet available and engaging in tasks not yet defined because the work world will change dramatically over the next decades. He will also receive many different kinds of education and training over the ensuing 40 years of his life--perhaps from his employer, perhaps from a trade school or community college. Though we may train him today to assume one trade, there is no way to train him for the specifics of each. And if we devote too much time training him for a skill that may disappear in the years ahead, we will have served poorly indeed. We must aim, then, to confer something broader: abilities and qualities that are useful in many different jobs.

Herein lies a new consensus among educators and employers on the nature of the utilitarian education of all students. It is, I believe, the middle ground we have been looking for, and it goes something like this:

The utilitarian function of the school is to assist in preparing all students for that 40-year sequence of events following graduation: for different employers, different jobs, and different trades. What will an individual need to help him through that sequence of events? I believe he or she will need three sets of attributes that are, in fact, embedded in Jefferson's enumeration of the various ends of education. These can be defined as general skills, general knowledge, and worthy values and habits.

At the heart of general skills lie basic literacy and mathematical abilities. These are essential to any job a person will hold. But there is more. To possess the requisite general skills is to possess the ability not just to read, but to read and draw conclusions. It means not just to write, but to communicate; not simply to compute, but to know what and when to compute. In other words, the utilitarian ends of education require that a person be able to think and reason clearly.

And why should the utilitarian aspects of education include the pursuit of general knowledge as well as general skills? For several reasons. First of all, just as general knowledge should help us become fulfilled human beings, it ought to help us become fulfilled workers and co-workers. Furthermore, knowledge is always the foundation of greater knowledge-- general knowledge provides the references through which new concepts can be grasped and understood. A poor background in science, for example, has proved an impediment to many in the past, and it will prove an even greater impediment in the increasingly technological future. And just as importantly, knowledge brings a desire for more knowledge; general knowledge makes us more likely to be workers who are able to learn over the course of a lifetime.

Finally, there is a set of values, attitudes, and habits that enable a person to function effectively on the job-- any job. We are talking about the ability to get out of bed in the morning and show up on time; to complete one's obligations and

live up to one's responsibilities; to work cooperatively with colleagues and take directions from superiors; to be honest and law-abiding, dependable and industrious.

Now these may seem to be commonsensical objectives. But they are the very qualities that employers say have been lacking. Lately, employers have been telling us that what they need is employees who bring with them basic cognitive skills, general knowledge, and the appropriate values, habits, and behaviors. It is these things that amount to what the National Academy of Sciences described as the "ability and readiness to learn throughout a working lifetime." An Academy panel of educators and employers wrote in its recent report, "High School and the Changing Work Place," that:

a person who knows how to learn is one well grounded in fundamental knowledge and who has mastered concepts and skills that can create an intellectual framework to which new knowledge can be added.

And recently, in a report entitled "Investing in our Children," the Committee for Economic Development sounded the same themes. It states:

For most students, employers would prefer a curriculum that stresses literacy, mathematical skills, and problem solving skills; one that emphasizes learning how to learn and adapting to change. The schools should teach and reward self-discipline, self-reliance, teamwork, acceptance of responsibility, and respect for the rights of others... [P]ublic education's most important task is to ensure that all school children are grounded in basic academic skills, behavioral patterns, and positive work habits.

Mathematics, literacy, cognitive skills, knowledge, self-discipline, responsibility: some of the terms are new, but the vision is not really different from that which Thomas Jefferson offered nearly two hundred years before. And whereas Jefferson wrote of the qualities as being integral to the general ends of education, now we are hearing the voices of the twentieth century employers calling for the same qualities as the necessary ingredients of the utilitarian aspect of education.

And so we have come full circle. We began by dividing the purposes of education into three sets-- civic, personal, and utilitarian. At the beginning we knew they were overlapping sets, but I think it is clear now that they overlap even more than we had originally supposed. For we have discovered that the same qualities are needed for good education in each-- general skills, general knowledge, and strength of character. The core curriculum for all our students must, therefore, stress general skills, general knowledge, and respect for values. And that core must begin in elementary school.

This is the kind of philosophy that I hope will guide vocational education in the coming years. It would, I think, mean some changes. In secondary school, for example, it would mean a solid academic curriculum for all students. But that curriculum would vary in approach for different students. Those whose career plans do not require a baccalaureate degree, for

example, might spend less time on the periodic table of elements and more on scientific reasoning, less on allegories and more on the logic that underlies a training manual.

And that's fine. Everyone should be exposed to some of the great ideas and works of our civilization. But just because you've read only a little Shakespeare doesn't make you less of a citizen than someone who has read more. And, by the same token, aiming toward a career in welding or masonry is every bit as admirable and worthy as aiming for a career in medicine or law. No less a worker than President Reagan has said, "America's tradesmen and women are the pistons that drive the engine of our economy. This country was built with the sweat and determination of hard-working men and women who... loved to work with their hands as well as their minds."

Yes, we teach things in school that can be applied in the world of work. But what's not pointed out enough is that there are things to be learned in the world of work that can be applied in school. In my high school summers, for example, I learned from work about patience, about keeping my temper, about collegiality, and about the occasional necessity of long hours in finishing a job. I learned about those things as a file clerk, as a garbage man, and as a moving man-- the kind of jobs that require no special training, vocational or otherwise. After those jobs, I learned that college, comparatively, was easy. Everyone should learn that.

There is certainly nothing wrong with putting learning in the context of work. Some students learn better that way. I did. The context for learning must be different for different students--again, this is our way of respecting diversity. Vocational education is no less admirable or worthy than any other form of education in our schools. But we must always remember that the main objective of learning in our schools must be the same for all students. If not, then we run the risk of creating a separate class of citizens, with separate skills and abilities. Differences in educational programs must never invite distinctions of citizenship. As Jefferson pointed out, every citizen needs to know certain things if equality is to be preserved. As we teach our students to work, we must be certain to teach them those things.

It may be, then, that members of your profession will want to take a close look at the objectives of individual programs in individual schools. I encourage you to do so. It may be that you will decide that job-specific training is best suited for the post-secondary level. Perhaps you will decide that vocational education in our high schools should be exploratory, in the form of broad career education, examining the behaviors and skills required in different jobs.

I will not try to predict the changes the reform movement will bring to vocational education. But whatever those changes, let me say that the current excellence movement, a movement I endorse, must be kept on track. It will go off track if it veers

toward a self-important pride about itself and a snobbishness and disdain toward the world of work. If it does that, it will lose me. More important, it will lose Thomas Jefferson.

I hope that you will keep in mind the philosophy I've talked about tonight -- one conscious of the relation between the various means and ends of education. I hope we will all reaffirm the broad purpose of education outlined nearly 200 hundred years ago by Thomas Jefferson: to prepare all our students for a working lifetime, a lifetime of learning, thinking, communicating, and bearing responsibilities to others, a lifetime in which they will have to appreciate that good competent work is a noble thing.

So to sum up, I believe we can give all our children the opportunity-- the equal opportunity-- promised by the principles of American democracy. We can give them an education that recognizes differences as well as similarities, but above all one that is anchored by a belief in the fundamental equality of all who study and labor in the same vineyard.

Thank you.